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Special Analysis

SYRIA: Views on the Peace Process

The Syrians, who have pretensions to a role of leadership in the Arab world, almost certainly were disappointed by the lack of any special mention of Syria or the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights in Washington's recent Middle East peace initiative. Damascus has tended to play a spoiling role in past peace schemes and has considerable potential for continuing to do so. For the time being, however, President Assad's regime has been careful not to comment too critically on the plan, and it probably will wait to see the general direction of events in the area before committing itself to a firm policy.

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Damascus has good reason to adopt a low profile. Syrian forces, dealt heavy blows by the Israelis, have been expelled from Beirut and are in a more threatened position in the rest of Lebanon. A Phalange-oriented government has come to power in Beirut with the intention of eliminating the remaining Syrian presence.

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PLO chief Arafat's determination to resist Syrian efforts to gain control of PLO policies has been reinforced by Syria's inability to prevent the PLO's expulsion from Beirut. Moreover, any reinvigoration of the peace process could bring Jordan into discussions with Israel on behalf of the PLO in a way that diminishes Syria's role and further weakens Assad's bargaining position.

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Syrian Objectives

Despite these setbacks, Syria's goals in any peace agreement are unchanged. First and foremost, Damascus seeks restoration of the Golan Heights to Syrian sovereignty. It also wants a settlement of the Palestinian problem under terms acceptable to the PLO.

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Syria also would expect to be recognized as a key participant in any Middle East settlement--one capable of blocking a settlement if it were not along acceptable lines. Consequently, Syria seeks maximum control over the PLO in order to ensure that this leverage will serve Syrian, and not Jordanian, interests.

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Neither the proposals of the recent Arab summit in Fez, Morocco, nor the US initiative meet these needs, and Assad will be content for now to stand aside, expecting one or both plans to fail in the face of Israeli intransigence. If the initiatives do founder, Syria will be better able than most other Arab states to escape being tainted by association with the proposals. [REDACTED]

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If the proposals seem to be making progress and Syrian interests are ignored, however, the Syrians probably will act as spoilers. They may in fact be drawn into this role if large numbers of radical Palestinians reject the current peace process and seek the leadership of a major Arab state to advance their cause. [REDACTED]

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To scuttle any talks, Damascus could provoke a political or military crisis in Lebanon to ensure strong Israeli reaction. Alternatively, the Syrians could instigate radical Palestinian action against the Israelis or encourage radical Palestinians to foment trouble in Jordan and elsewhere. [REDACTED]

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External Pressure on Damascus

Other countries will have only a minimum effect on the approach Assad chooses. The USSR has hailed the Fez plan for allotting it a role in the peace process, but the Soviets probably would not push Damascus to accept the plan if Syria's basic aims were not being met. Moscow is likely to support and may encourage efforts to impede the US plan, but this probably would not have more than marginal impact. [REDACTED]

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Saudi Arabia's financial support gives it some leverage. Assad, however, almost certainly will reject Riyadh's demarches without reciprocal concessions by Israel. [REDACTED]

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The Syrians clearly are unwilling at this point to reject the US initiative outright, but they will be difficult to bring on board. If they try to become spoilers, their success will depend largely on the extent and nature of Israel's reaction to their provocations. [REDACTED]

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